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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: UNDERSTANDING THE INSURGENCY

REF: A. 05 BANGKOK 07573 (LABELING THE MILITANTS "BRN-C")  
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 03378 (NEW VIOLENCE STATISTICS MORE  
DEADLY AMBUSHES)  
[1](#)C. BANGKOK 03813 (SECURITY FORCES MOVING FORWARD AS  
SECTARIAN TENSIONS SIMMER)  
[1](#)D. BANGKOK 04168 (LEADING ACADEMIC EXPERT SEES SOME  
IMPROVEMENT)  
[1](#)E. BANGKOK 04217 (GOOD POLICY POORLY IMPLEMENTED)

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. A better understanding of the insurgency behind the nearly three year spate of violence in southern Thailand is emerging, but this village-based, horizontal network of cells defies neat characterization. There is no single label, or hierarchy behind the violence, and divisions between different leadership nodes may be developing. Elements of an insurgent group founded in the 1960s, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate (BRN-C), played a key role in setting the stage for this latest round of violence, but the movement has grown beyond the control of this group. Many of the militants behind the recent spate of violence consider themselves "Patani Freedom Fighters" in the local dialect, but do not have a clear sense of their own leadership. Their goals appear limited to continued violence that erodes state authority and drives Buddhists out of the three provinces. Divisions over tactics, goals, and even between old and younger generations of militants appear to be growing, or at least more visible. While some elements of the separatist movement increasingly use religious language to justify their attacks, the insurgency remains a localized, ethno-nationalist movement. There are no new indications of significant foreign involvement in the violence. The separatist cause is succeeding in building a climate of fear in the South, but a parallel political agenda has not emerged and their brutal tactics may be provoking a decrease in public support for the movement. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Reftel (A) outlined a growing consensus among Thai security experts that members of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Coordinate play a key role in the violence in Thailand's ethnic-Malay Muslim provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat. Indeed, security officials may have taken this idea too far, labeling the entire separatist movement in the South "BRN-C." Nearly two years later, our best contacts in the South are painting a picture of a broad, but splintered separatist movement that is much more than just the BRN-C.

## IDENTIFICATION FAILURE

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13. (C) Since the latest wave of insurgent violence began in 2004, Thai officials have struggled to put a face or name to the militant cause. Indeed, initially, RTG officials denied that a new chapter in this century-long separatist conflict had begun, derisively ascribing a rise in violent attacks to criminals and corrupt politicians. As the violence continued, however, marked by near-daily assassinations and frequent multi-province coordinated attacks, security officials publicly shifted their stance to an acknowledgment that the separatist cause was alive and well in three southern provinces.

14. (C) Even as they acknowledged the revival of the separatists, however, RTG officials undercut their own efforts to clearly identify and counter this movement. Rather than focus on developing a bottom-up picture of the current insurgent movement through the effective interrogation and rehabilitation of captured fighters, the Thai security apparatus became fixated on identifying the top leaders of the movement and neutralizing them. This focus on cutting the head off of the snake, as it were, was driven by the success of a similar strategy in the last upsurge in separatist violence in 1997-98. Following several weeks of cross-province violence in the South, RTG officials were able to identify, and with Malaysian assistance, detain, four top insurgent leaders from the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO). Following these coordinated arrests, RTG officials publicly offered amnesty to separatists who turned themselves in. This lightning-strike decapitation,

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followed by broad amnesty, broke the spirit and commitment of the separatist movement in short order, leading to an uneasy peace for several years.

15. (C) While this historical lesson offers several significant learning points relevant to the latest round of violence--the need for close cooperation with Malaysia, the benefits of amnesty programs, the importance of good intelligence--by 2005 Thai commanders had whittled this list down to a single element: determine who the top leaders of the separatists are, and capture them.

16. (C) This error of overwhelmingly focusing on one level of the separatist movement was compounded by another, more subtle, miscalculation. RTG security and intelligence leaders, who were already hampered by poor information sharing, a reliance on unvetted information and the lack of rigorous analytic support, approached the question of "who are the insurgents" with an answer firmly in mind. Indeed, rather than build a picture of the current militant movement based on arrests, interrogations and intelligence, RTG officials apparently used information from the field to fit a preconceived framework of what they, the Thai government experts, thought that the insurgency should look like. Naturally, these professional soldiers and police believed that the insurgents operated within a clearly defined, well-organized hierarchy, just as the Thai government did.

17. (C) But what if the basics of this framework were wrong to begin with? What if, instead of a clearly delineated, hierarchical structure--much like the military or police--the insurgency had evolved into a locally-based, horizontal patchwork of attack cells and support groups, without a clearly identified leadership that the government could strike? Even worse, what if this new generation of separatists purposely decentralized key command and control functions?

SECREC Y A CONSCIOUS CHOICE

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18. (C) RTG officials were not alone in looking to the 1998 arrests as a key learning point. Insurgent leaders drew their own lessons from that period. According to Jane's Intelligence's Anthony Davis (protect), a long time security analyst in Thailand, he recently met with several "old generation" insurgents in Malaysia. These contacts said that separatist leaders were "shocked" by the 1998 arrests, specifically the willingness of the Malaysian security forces to cooperate with the Thai. Before, Thai insurgents in Malaysia could expect tip-offs from local security personnel and politicians before official raids. These contacts told Davis that, following these events, insurgent leaders specifically decided to refrain from taking credit for any future attacks. These exiled leaders also improved their personal security, often changing houses each night, and pulled back from contact with Malaysian officials. More importantly, they moved to decentralize command and control of the movement to improve security.

#### LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR WAR: 1998-2004

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19. (C) Davis emphasizes that, while many analysts look at 2004 as the "start" of the latest period in the southern insurgency, the roots of the current violence lie in the period following the 1998 PULO arrests. According to Davis, these detentions opened the door for a new generation of BRN-C leaders like Masae Useng and Sapaeing Basoe. From 1998 to 2004, BRN-C, which had its roots in efforts to resist government control over local education, worked to expand its network of support in both religious and state schools. Davis points to a slight rise of small attacks in 2001-2003, particularly in BRN-C's home province of Narathiwat, which he called preparations for the wider campaigns of 2004 and onward.

#### SO WHO ARE THE INSURGENTS?

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10. (C) BRN-C appears to have played a key role in reviving and expanding the separatist cause, but the movement appears to have grown beyond the control of this single organization. Our contacts are increasingly in agreement that the current round of violence is driven by a horizontal network of village-based insurgent cells with varying degree of connections to older, more established groups like BRN-C. Human Rights Watch's Sunai Phasuk (protect), who maintains regular contact with insurgent figures in the South says that BRN-C serves as the "backbone" of the insurgency, but that most insurgents call themselves "Patani Freedom Fighters" or "Pejuang Kemerdekaan Patani" in the local Melayu dialect. These fighters are not recruited into BRN-C, but are often spotted and trained through networks--often in religious schools--that were established by BRN-C. Davis agrees that that the insurgency is a mix of figures from the older, established separatist movement and a new generation of autonomous "fighters" at the village level.

11. (C) Sunai says that the militants lack a strong group identity. He says that most of the separatists he talks to don't even know the names of the BRN-C's senior leaders. According to Sunai, cell leaders are usually in their 30s, while fighters carrying out attacks are in their teens to early 20s. These cells recruit two kinds of kids: very pious, educated "true believers" who are identified in Pondok or private Islamic Schools, and drug addicts, petty criminals or "troubled kids" who are given a chance to redeem themselves through violence. Sometimes they are simply guns for hire and are paid to kill.

12. (C) According to Davis, the penetration of the insurgency is uneven across the South, with some villages home to a particularly well organized cell of separatist "fighters" while some others serve as temporary refuges for the cause.

Sunai says that particularly adept operational cells sometimes travel to different provinces to undertake more difficult or brutal operations. For example, Sunai says that the Yala-based cells are "the worst" and have traveled to nearby Pattani to undertake special missions, such as the April 30 murder of two Buddhists in Pattani. Both bodies were burned and then booby-trapped.

¶13. (C) Within the movement, those fighters who have received more advanced training in Thailand (Note: we have heard no serious allegations that this generation of fighters have received training overseas. End Note.) are labeled "RKK" or members of the Runda Kumpulan Kecil. When originally confronted with this designation in 2004, RTG officials took this Bahasa language phrase as evidence of Indonesian training, rather than understanding that this was a local Jawi-language label. Davis points out, however, that even recent improvements (ref B) in insurgent attacks against military and police tactics are still relatively crude. "The insurgents have never been that good, these are not supermen." According to Davis, their training is poor and they lack "strategic space," munitions, and a political agenda.

#### A MOVEMENT WITHOUT LEADERS

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¶14. (C) No one group or leader appears to be in control of the violence. Francesca Lawe-Davies from the International Crisis Group (protect) says that most village level cells are acting largely autonomously, permitting the individual cells to decide what constitutes a legitimate target. Horizontal contacts between cell leaders allow for large scale coordinated attacks to occur such as the January 18, 2006 arson attacks, but there is still little evidence that a larger leadership structure directs the attacks. Davis contends that, there is a "missing layer" of leadership between the separatists in exile and fighters on the ground: "there is no middle layer," he says.

¶15. (C) Some RTG officials judge that Sapaeing Basoe, the former principal of the Thammawithaya Foundation School is the real mastermind behind the attacks. An NGO official who has had contact with BRN-C does not believe that Sapaeing is the top leader. He said he had found that the movement was

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"run by committee." This same official said there are several factions within the militants and a lot of internal rivalry and competition over funds. In the end, when the insurgency reaches the point when a titular leader is to come forward it will likely be former Senator Den Tomina, the son of revered separatist leader Haji Sulong.

¶16. (C) Davis points out that this diffuse structure "is their strength and their weakness." While denying the RTG an easily identifiable center of gravity to attack, this lack of command and control precludes the wider political organization and mobilization needed to take the "next step."

Davis says that the current generation of "fighters" lack a clear plan beyond spreading violence and eroding government control in the provinces; "they only focus on what is in front of them." Notable security expert Dr. Panitan Wattanayakorn echoes this view, saying "we have been fortunate that the militants are so poorly organized. Things could have been much worse." None of our contacts has seen evidence of serious separatist efforts to build public support for their movement or provide government-like services and organization to the local population.

#### RIFTS IN THE MOVEMENT

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¶17. (C) Our contacts point to increasing evidence of generational, geographic and other divisions within the insurgency. Of these divisions, that between older

separatists--many schooled in the protest politics of the 1970s and now in exile--and the younger generation engaged in violence appears to be the most important. Dr. Panitan says that the new generation of militants does not identify themselves as being part of BRN-C or other separatist groups. These youth appear to have little knowledge of -- or interest in -- belonging to the traditional groups and have widely divergent backgrounds -- some are devout Muslims, some are petty criminals and drug addicts."

¶18. (C) National Security Council Secretary-General Prakit Prachonpachanuk emphasizes the significance of the generation shift between the old and new generation of militants, noting that older leaders cannot control the angry young men behind the attacks. RTA Gen. Pathompong Kasornsuk, former assistant 4th Army Commander echoes this point, saying that traditional leaders in the South cannot control the new generation of militants. According to Pathompong, "there is no connection between PULO and the old guys and the new generation." Professor Duncan McCargo, who spent a year in Pattani researching the current situation, says that there has been a large generational shift in the South, with many traditional leaders voicing concern that the younger generation can not be controlled. Sunai echoed this comment, saying that the older generation is "losing control" of the new breed of militants.

¶19. (C) Several observers believe the cells are very turf conscious and that there is a lot of competition between groups who often are also involved in criminal activities. Dr. Panitan believes that several "warlords" representing groups in separate districts are emerging and often act independently with different objectives. Sunai says that some younger militant cells are starting to expand their involvement in criminal enterprises, leading to rifts with more "pure" cells in other districts.

#### CONFLICT OVER GOALS

¶20. (C) A more subtle rift over the tactics and goals of the movement appears to be growing, exacerbated in part by the decentralized nature of the movement. Both Davis and Sunai point to older separatists' disagreement with the more brutal tactics of the new generation, including attacks on civilians, Buddhist monks and school teachers. This revulsion appears to be shared by an increasingly large segment of the local population. Davis wonders if older, more moderate groups such as PULO can take advantage of what he terms "popular frustration" with BRN-C tactics. Sunai emphasizes that, while many local villagers in the South are

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sympathetic to some separatist demands (the need for justice and better RTG administration, an end to assimilation efforts), those that support the current generation of "fighters" often do so out of fear. He points out that insurgent tactics focus on punishing local villagers who support the authorities, rather than rewarding them for supporting the separatist cause. Sunai believes that popular "backlash" to these tactics is increasingly likely, but only if RTG security officials can provide better security.

¶21. (C) The possibility of negotiations with the Thai government is also creating divisions within the movement. A close contact of exiled leader Wan Kadir--the self proclaimed leader of the Bersatu separatist umbrella organization--says that Wan Kadir would likely be killed by other insurgents for "selling out" (i.e. supporting dialogue with the RTG) if he returned to Thailand. Sunai says that even BRN-C notables Masae Useng and Sapaeing Basoe are under criticism for acknowledging the possibility of peace talks with the RTG.

¶22. (C) The insurgents appear to be divided over goals as well. Sunai says there is still no unity of objectives among the militants. Some want government troops withdrawn, some



want Melayu to be the official language of the South, and some want independence. Davis points out that the differences over separatist goals have led to repeated splits in the movement in the last thirty years and prevented previous attempts to build unity.

#### "ETHNIC CLEANSING"

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123. (C) Sunai is extremely concerned, however, by the growth of a new, more explicitly hard-line objective among some factions of the insurgency. He points out that, historically, the most hard-line separatists called for independence and the re-establishment of the Sultanate of Patani. This goal, according to Sunai, did not include the death or expulsion of all ethnic-Thai Buddhists from the South. Since 1998, he continues, some "fringe" elements of the separatists have called for such a wide-sweeping move, and he believes that increasing numbers of militant cells espouse this strategy. While provoking ethnic-Thai Buddhists to leave the South out of fear has been an ancillary benefit of previous violence, Sunai worries that "ethnic cleansing" is now on the insurgents' agenda.

#### THE ROLE OF ISLAM AND THE WORLD

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124. (C) The insurgent movement remains overwhelmingly rooted in ethnic-identity nationalism, but Sunai, like several of our contacts, points out that religion is a key, immutable part of that ethnic-Malay identity. Even the earliest calls for the restoration of a fabled Patani Sultanate fifty years ago were couched in religious terms and obligations. Ethnic-Malay Muslim students who studied overseas in the 1970s and 1980s returned to Thailand to energize a new round of separatist struggle, often invoking the nationalist, socialist and religious language they learned abroad. But the broader separatist movement, while using religious identity and language as tools in their cause, did not cite religious tenets as the motivation for their struggle. That may be changing.

125. (C) Now Sunai says that he is seeing traces of a simplistic, more conservative Islam among some of the newer separatist factions. These factions, while not espousing the creation of an Islamic state or imposition of Sharia law, often focus on the need for ethnic-Malay Muslims in the South to be more devout. Such groups sometimes issue "simplistic" edicts against karaoke or other "bad things." They are also, according to Sunai, labeling ethnic-Thai Buddhists "infidels" and decrying ethnic-Malay Muslims who support the State as "hypocrites."

126. (C) These factions, Sunai argues, are "definitely not Wahabi" or fundamentalist, and evince a remarkably low level of educated Islamic knowledge, suggesting that this is not the result of foreign influence. Instead, they are trying to

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hone the use of religion to increase their legitimacy. Davis agrees that there are some strains of separatists that continue to use religious language--as they have always done, he points out--but says that he "doesn't understand the emphasis of some academics on Wahabists." Davis points out that well known Wahabist educators like Dr. Lutfi Japagiya are seen by many insurgent figures as agents of patronizing, foreign and alien Islamic thinking. The insurgents, the self-professed guardians of a local political-religious tradition are "the antithesis of Wahabists."

127. (C) There are no new indications of active foreign participation or support for the insurgency. Indeed, the impact of global events and news on the separatist movement remains very low. Davis says that he has always been struck by how "provincial" and "localized" the separatist movement is, despite the influence of local leaders who have studied

abroad, and he sees no signs of that changing. Sunai says that he has seen no signs of local interest in regional, let alone international, issues. He adds that insurgent leaders "oppose internationalizing the conflict" out of fear of losing control of what for them is a local struggle. Davis agrees with the deep-rooted focus on local goals, saying "you could have 100 Indonesians suddenly arrive and take up arms, and it wouldn't change the nature of the insurgency."

COMMENT

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128. (C) Our understanding of the insurgency remains a work in progress, but this emerging picture suggests that the separatist cause is a long way from organizing either a massive public uprising against the Thai state or establishing a sophisticated political movement to supplant Bangkok's authority. But just as the decentralized nature of the insurgency may frustrate attempts to take the struggle to the next level, it will also continue to challenge RTG efforts to bring peace to the South, whether through improved security operations, negotiations or some combination of the two. Even with the best of progress on both fronts, Thai authorities will be hard pressed to walk-back the culture of fear and violence that grips the South. A significant portion of southern inhabitants now bear the scars of daily violence, either as victims or perpetrators, and undoing that damage will take years.

BOYCE